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Kent Thompson, Artistic Director

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Synopsis

*"We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do,
Wives may be merry, and yet honest, too."*

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV-ii

The impoverished knight, Sir John Falstaff, is lodging at the Garter Inn in Windsor. He decides to woo Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, not for love but for money, because he knows that they control their husbands' purses. But his schemes misfire when they are revealed to Masters Ford and Page by Falstaff's disgruntled followers, Bardolph, Pistol and Nim. The furiously jealous Ford takes revenge by thrashing Falstaff while the two wily women add to his humiliation by playing a series of jokes on him. Meanwhile, the Pages' daughter, Anne, usurps familial authority by refusing to marry her parents' preferred suitor and instead marries the man she really loves, the impoverished Fenton.

The play has been described as a farce, a jolly romp and a comic morality play in which values are tested and virtue triumphs over vice. Whatever it is, the play combines the elements of love, greed, jealousy, deception, mistaken identity and mangled language into a classical comedy.

FALSTAFF: *"I will be cheaters to them both, and they shall be exchequers to me."*

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I-ii

A Brief Biography of the Bard: William Shakespeare

For all his fame and celebration, the personal history of Shakespeare is rather mysterious. The two primary sources of information on the Bard are his works and the surviving legal and church documents from Elizabethan times. This fact leaves us with little information about Shakespeare, the man.

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, records from the Holy Trinity Church indicate that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564. His birthday is commonly thought to be April 23. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover and leather merchant, while his mother, Mary Arden, was a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children, three of whom died in childhood. After a remarkable run of success as a merchant, John Shakespeare became involved in Stratford politics as an alderman and high bailiff, a position similar to a sheriff. His fortunes declined in the 1570s for unknown reasons.

Shakespeare's childhood years, especially his education, are the subject of much speculation. It is believed that he attended Stratford's free grammar school, which at that time had a reputation to rival Eton's. Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin and classical Greek support this theory and the literary quality of his work suggests a solid education. What is certain is that William Shakespeare never went to university, which has stirred debate about the authorship of his works.

His marriage to Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582 is the next documented event in Shakespeare's life. He was 18 years old at the time; she was 26 and three months pregnant. Anne gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, on May 26, 1583. Twins Hamnet and Judith were born on February 2, 1585, although Hamnet died 11 years later. From the birth of the twins to his appearance in London, there is nothing on record and these years are romantically termed as "lost."

Shakespeare may have joined a theatre company that toured through Stratford or he may have left of his own accord. It is known that by 1592 he had made a name for himself as an actor and playwright in London's theatrical world. By 1594 he had joined a theatre group known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men (called The King's Men after the 1603 ascension of James I), in which he played principal roles and became a managing partner. With master comedian Will Kempe and Richard Burbage, a leading tragic actor of the day, The Lord Chamberlain's Men became a favorite of the theatre-going public and the royalty. Queen Elizabeth invited the troupe every Christmas to act for her at the palace. Shakespeare responded to this honor by writing *Richard III*, which legitimized the Tudor ascension.

Shakespeare's time in London parallels the progression of the plague and theatres were often forced to close to prevent its spread. This practice prompted The Lord Chamberlain's Men to move from the closed Blackfriars Theatre that was within London's boundaries, to another site across the river. In the middle of a summer's night, the men completely dismantled the Blackfriars and carried the lumber across the river for use in building the Globe theatre. The Blackfriars' owner was out of town on business at the time and, because the troupe had been leasing the theatre, he sued The Lord Chamberlain's Men for this act. Surprisingly, The Lord Chamberlain's men won the lawsuit.

Shakespeare's success is apparent when compared with other playwrights of the age. His company was London's most successful and his plays were published and sold in octavo editions or "penny-copies" to the more literate of his audiences. Never before had a playwright seen his works published and sold as popular literature in his own time. Though not wealthy by London standards, his success allowed him to purchase New House and retire comfortably to Stratford in 1611.

According to his will, written in 1616, William Shakespeare bequeathed all of his property to his eldest and favorite daughter, Susanna. Her sister, Judith received 300 pounds and his wife Anne was left the famous “second best bed.” The best explanation for this conundrum is that most likely arrangements had already been made for Anne to move in with Susanna and her husband, Dr. John Hall, to whom he’d given his favorite bed.

Shakespeare died on his 52nd birthday, April 23, though this is probably more myth than reality. Records show that he was buried at the Holy Trinity Church of Stratford on April 25, 1616. Seven years after his death, two of Shakespeare’s companions from The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, printed the

First Folio edition of his Collected Works. This 1623 text contained Shakespeare’s sonnets and many previously unpublished works.

William Shakespeare’s legacy is a body of work that may never again be equaled in Western civilization. He wrote histories such as *Henry IV* and *Henry V*; tragedies such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*; and comedies such as *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. His works have endured for more than 400 years, reaching the hearts and minds of audiences as powerfully as ever.

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

Themes of the Play

FALSTAFF: “Well, *I am your theme. You have the start of me....Use me as you will.*”

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, V-v

Contrary to his words, Falstaff is not the theme of the play though he plays a huge part in its action. According to Jeanne Addison Roberts in her study of *The Merry Wives*, she writes the themes are typically English: “...cuckoldry, the suspected infidelity of wives, and the element of opposition between rural virtue and the cheating of city sharpers.”¹ Falstaff tries to seduce the Mistresses Page and Ford, but they do not succumb to his advances. However, Master Ford suspects his wife of hanky-panky and goes to ridiculous lengths to prove it. Finally, Windsor is not truly rural, but a small, powerful town where “the pastoral values of simplicity and humility have triumphed over wit and worldliness.”² However, several pages later, Roberts says the play focuses on marriage and the evils that prevent maintaining a good one: “greed, lust, jealousy and stupidity.”³ To that end, David Ivers, the director of our play, says: “This is a play about the maturation of love and what place it occupies as we grow older.”⁴

To reinforce the middle class values of Windsor,

the wives become the defenders of the social order of Shakespeare’s day.

For 21st century audiences the themes and meanings are somewhat different. Michelle Ephraim in her essay on *The Merry Wives of Windsor* says that one of the themes is the emerging authority of women. Elizabeth I had reigned over England for four decades when Shakespeare wrote this play, so she is implicated when the wives exercise control over their husbands, servants and Falstaff. At the same time there was ambivalence toward this level of female authority.

“Like Elizabeth, the wives use love as a political device to shape, contain and deny male desire.”⁵ The unmarried Queen cultivated her persona as “the Virgin Queen,” a paragon of chastity and strength. The wives also claim chastity, but chaste women incite suspicion in the play. Master Ford claims his wife’s chastity is only a ruse that allows her to hide her illicit behavior. The play suggests, “...an ostensibly chaste woman may have an affinity for adultery which establishes the central theme of cuckoldry....”⁶ This fact is expressed vividly in Ford’s paranoid fantasies about his wife. The term “cuckold” has been around since the mid-13th century and symbolizes man’s vulnerability to a

woman in marriage. Cuckolds seem to appear in Shakespeare's works frequently from his early plays to his late ones.

Thus, it falls to Falstaff "to articulate the male viewers' desires to see their anxieties represented and subsequently purged through the safe artifice of the theatre."⁷

1. Roberts, p. 59.
2. Slights, p. 166.
3. Roberts, p. 73.
4. Preliminary Design Conference Notes, p. 1.
5. Ephraim, p. 468.
6. Ephraim, p. 469.
7. Ephraim, p. 470.

Preliminary Design Conference Notes. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Denver Center for the Performing Arts, October, 2007.

Roberts, Jeanne Addison. *Shakespeare's English Comedy: The Merry Wives of Windsor in Context*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Rosenblum, Joseph, ed. *The Greenwood Companion to Shakespeare*. Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2005.

Ephraim, Michelle. "The Merry Wives of Windsor."

Slights, Camille Wells. *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

Falstaff

FALSTAFF: "Thine own true knight
By day or night or any kind of light
With all his might for thee to fight."
—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Act II-i

In this letter to Mistress Page, Falstaff displays two aspects of his character: a braggart and a poor poet. He also is an egocentric, pleasure-seeking man, totally "ruled by his appetite for food, drink, sleep, women and money."¹ He also is a thief, a liar, a drunkard, a sponger, a swindler and a coward who exploits others for his own welfare. "Devoid of morality, Falstaff is portrayed as self-seeking, unscrupulous and corrupt."²

Despite all these faults, Falstaff remains a hugely popular character. He is an endless source of amusement, poking fun at his own corpulence and the follies of society. He lives by his wits and resourcefulness and is an individual with a brilliant command of the English language. Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Will in the World* writes: "Falstaff seems actually to possess a mysterious

inner principle of vitality."³ According to theatrical history, it was this "inner principle" that Queen Elizabeth I admired. She urged Shakespeare to write a play showing Falstaff in love and thus, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written.

Jeanne Roberts in her study of the play feels that Falstaff is a changed man from the knight of *Henry IV*. Falstaff, who considered women fair game, is now "put to shame and made to quake for fear by two women."⁴ She contends that Shakespeare deliberately pulled Falstaff down for the purpose of showing his vices, greed, lust and selfishness, to be absolutely dreadful. In addition, Falstaff is not seen through the eyes of the nobility in this play, but those of the Windsor populace who favor a more Puritanical form of life. Falstaff, who has spent his life in the customs of the court, fails to understand the middle class of Windsor; therefore, the play "has a central conflict between two levels of society."⁵ After Falstaff has been thoroughly humiliated by all, he becomes "Fall-staff, the figure of impotence his very name suggests."⁶

Shakespeare created Falstaff to insult Robert Greene, another playwright, Stephen Greenblatt postulates in the highly speculative *Will in the World*. Greene had called Shakespeare an “upstart crow, beautified with our feathers.”⁷ Consequently, rather than challenge Greene to a duel, Shakespeare chose to characterize the man, a graduate of Oxford and Cambridge but a patron of low taverns with their crowd of cutthroats and ruffians, as a disreputable fellow. “Falstaff captured Greene’s bingeing and whoring, his ‘dropsical’ belly...his cynical exploitation of friends, his brazenness, his seedy charm.”⁸ But Greene was not the sole source, for Shakespeare drew from his own experiences and others. In an anonymous play called *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, the cast included a dissolute knight, Sir John Oldcastle. Shakespeare took the character, but not the name, and “built upon its spare frame his vast creation.”⁹

FAIRIES: *Fie on sinful fantasy! / Fie on lust and luxury!*

Lust is but a bloody fire, / Kindled with unchaste desire....

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act V-v

1. Gibson, p. 165.
2. Gibson, p. 165.
3. Greenblatt, p. 222.
4. Roberts, p. 88.
5. Roberts, p. 108.
6. Roberts, p. 77.
7. Greenblatt, p. 213.
8. Greenblatt, p. 219.
9. Greenblatt, p. 220.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World*. London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004.

Roberts, Jeanne Addison. *Shakespeare’s English Comedy: The Merry Wives of Windsor in Context*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

The Merry Wives and Daughter

MISTRESS FORD: “Why, this is the very same: the very hand, the very words. What doth he think of us?”

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Act II-i

In Elizabethan England men were supposed to be firmly in control. Husbands and fathers had almost complete authority over the lives of their wives and daughters; women’s rights were restricted legally, socially and economically. This practice of male superiority also was supported by the Church. The Elizabethan “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” which ordered wives to obey their husbands, was frequently read aloud in services.

However, the reality was quite different. With Elizabeth I in power, some husbands regarded their wives as equals and many marriages were based on equality of respect and love. “Companionate marriage was a feature of a large number of Elizabethan homes: partnership and strong emotional ties.”¹

The Merry Wives of Windsor presents a picture of the condition of women in Elizabethan England that is quite different from that of the stereotypical male dominance. Unlike Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies, the women characters have the major parts and speak as many words as the men. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page are witty, intelligent, ingenious and full of good humor. They are independent spirits who can take care of themselves; they do not give the impression that they are under their husbands’ dominance. “The wives manage their own affairs, and probably their husbands’ too, holding the purse strings of the household.”² Anne Page, too, is like her mother, independent and strong-minded. She rejects her parents’ preferences for a husband when she says: “Alas, I had rather be set quick i’ the earth and bowled to death with turnips!” (Act III-iv).

Shakespeare seems to suggest the wives have only one fault: for all their good sense, they do not see that Falstaff is after their money, not their personal charms. That is where the term “merry” emerges. Elizabethans watching the play would know that “merry” meant more than young at heart, fun-loving and energetic. In Shakespeare’s time, “merry” had the connotation of sexual playing around. “But that is a meaning that the Wives directly deny when Mistress Page declares, “Wives may be merry and yet honest too.”³ The wives may be outspoken and enjoy bawd, but they are faithful both to their husbands and their reputations. Their husbands matter to them. They prove to be protectors of Windsor’s traditional values as they use their intelligence and inventiveness to teach Falstaff a humiliating lesson.

MISTRESS PAGE: *Let’s consult together against this greasy knight. Come hither.*

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II-i

1. Gibson, p. 168.

2. Gibson, p. 169.

3. Gibson, p. 170.

Dusinberre, Juliet. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. New York: MacMillan Press, 1975.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Ziegler, Georgianna. *Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*. Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1987.

Shakespeare's Mangled Language

FALSTAFF: "Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English?"

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act V-v

The *Merry Wives of Windsor* has been described as a "citizen comedy" because it deals with ordinary people in a small English town. Most of the speeches are written in prose to convey the provincial flavor; blank verse is used by Fenton, the poor nobleman, Falstaff sometimes, and the fairies in the final scene.

Many of the characters have an amusing style of speech.

For example, Hugh Evans has a Welsh accent and refers to the "lucres" on an old coat as "louses" while he mispronounces "words" as "worts."

Bardolph speaks obscure language and misuses 'sentences' for "senses," "fap" for "drunk," "cashiered" for "thrown out."

Slender thinks he may be speaking Latin, but Bardolph may be trying to baffle Slender. The Host of the Garter Inn has his own distinctive style of speaking: he calls other characters "bully" (meaning something like "brave fellow") and uses exaggerated comparisons, flattering Falstaff with names such as Hector, Hercules, Emperor, Caesar, etc.

Pistol, too, uses exaggerated language as well as old-fashioned words seldom heard in Shakespeare's time such as "ken" for "know" and "wight" for "man."

Nim's constant use of the word "humour" amuses everybody. "Humour" today means something that makes us laugh, but Elizabethans believed that the personality was shaped by four humours (fluids in the body). "These were blood (producing bravery); phlegm (producing calm); yellowe (producing anger); and black bile (producing melancholy)."¹ If the humours were in balance, the person was healthy.

Meanwhile, Dr. Caius mixes French with English, which appealed to the English audiences because they detested the French.

Mistress Quickly is a busybody and a trickster who speaks in malapropisms. She mistakes "allicholy" for "melancholy," "canaries" for "quandaries," "speciously" for "specially" and calls Mistress Ford "fartuous" instead of "virtuous."

David Ivers, our director, feels that Shakespeare used this mangled language as a "barrier" to getting to the real truth. The husbands and Falstaff must "dig" through the accents, bluster and barbs to realize that the wives really love and respect their husbands.

Though these characters may be deemed grotesque, obsessive or eccentric, Shakespeare has given each one "a distinctive voice or verbal tic [that] creates a unique personality and stage presence."²

1. Gibson, p. 40.

2. Gibson, p. 172.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2003.

Rosenblum, Joseph, ed. *The Greenwood Companion to Shakespeare*. London: Greenwood Press, 2005.

Ephraim, Michelle. "The Merry Wives of Windsor."

Shakespeare's Sources

“There is no play of Shakespeare’s which draws so unmistakably on his own experiences of English life as this, and the dramatist’s real source here is indubitably the life of the Elizabethan.”

—Felix Schelling, *Elizabethan Drama: 1558-1642*

It is believed *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was first performed at the Garter Celebrations on or about April 23, 1597 when the patron of Shakespeare’s acting company, Lord Hunsdon the Lord Chamberlain, was installed as a Knight of the Garter. Though many believe Queen Elizabeth I requested him to write a play about Falstaff in love, others think Lord Hunsdon commissioned Shakespeare to write the play as a contribution to the entertainment, but gave him very little time.

Popular culture contributed to Shakespeare’s imagination when he wrote this play. Elizabethans loved the wild stories they read in jest-books; such tales contained elements of trickery and the ridiculing of foreigners and their accents. But Shakespeare liked to read the works of others, particularly foreigners. There are elements of the short stories of Straparola and Boccaccio; an Italian collection of stories, *Il Pecorone*, by Fiorentino (c. 1558) gave the playwright the idea of hiding a suitor under the laundry. The Anne Page sub-plot is drawn from the comedy *Casina* by the Roman playwright, Plautus.

Michelle Ephraim in her essay writes that the “braggart soldier, a stock character in *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552), is the prototype for Falstaff.”¹ In this play by Nicholas Udall, Roister Doister attempts to seduce a provincial wife for financial gain.

Shakespeare’s focus on the theme of cuckoldry derives from medieval farce and was employed during the 14th century by Geoffrey Chaucer in “The Miller’s Tale” from *Canterbury Tales*. John Lyle’s play *Endymion* probably contributed to the tormenting of Falstaff. In *Endymion*, a character is pinched by fairies who cry: “Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue,”²

1. Ephraim, p. 401.

2. Gibson, p. 182.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Roberts, Jeanne Addison. *Shakespeare’s English Comedy: The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Rosenblum, Joseph, ed. *The Greenwood Companion to Shakespeare*. London: Greenwood Press, 2005.

Ephraim, Michelle. “The Merry Wives of Windsor.”

Herne's Oak

MISTRESS FORD: “*The hour draws on. To the oak, to the oak!*”

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act V-iii

Act V, Scene v of the play takes place in Windsor Park near Herne's Oak. The supposed location of the tree was, for many years, a matter of local speculation and controversy. Some maps show Herne's Oak a little to the north of Frogmore House, in the Home Park adjoining Windsor Great Park. However, the great oak of Shakespeare's time was cut down in 1796. Queen Victoria, unfortunately, had a replacement planted on a different site, which was felled by a storm in 1863. The bungle, however, was corrected by her son, King Edward VII, who planted the current Herne's Oak in 1906.

It is claimed that Herne is a manifestation of the Celtic Horned God. This idea is largely based on connecting his name and appearance with

Cernunnos, a deity known from both Britain and Gaul. This theory is put forward by Margaret Murray in her 1931 book, *The God of the Witches*. Herne is a very local legend not found outside Berkshire and the surrounding regions into which Windsor Forest once spread.

In the Dark Ages Windsor Forest was settled by pagan Anglo-Saxons who worshipped their own pantheon of gods, including Wodan who rode across the night sky with his own Wild Hunt. He also hanged himself on an ash tree in order to learn the runic alphabet. Some think this suggests non-Celtic origins for Herne, others that the original Celtic deity was merely adapted by the Saxons, as often happens when cultures intermingle.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herne_the_Hunter

Women of Windsor in the 1920s

It was a wonderful natty time for clothing and a time for things to unravel.

—David Ivers, director

Our director has set the play in the 1920s because women were independent and empowered. It was a decade of prosperity, so the wives are dressed in expensive, sophisticated clothing as opposed to the zany outfits of the flapper. Confident and competent, Mistresses Ford and Page know everyone in Windsor; their reputations are on the line if they dress—or behave—badly. Their affluence gives them plenty of time to plan the pranks on Falstaff.

Their favorite designer was probably Paul Poiret whose “look” banished the corset from a woman's wardrobe. He said: “I waged war upon it...It divided its wearer into two distinct masses: on one side there was the bust and bosom, on the other, the whole backward aspect, so that the lady looked

as if she was hauling a trailer.”¹

But Poiret didn't abandon the corset for health or safety reasons. He did it to shake things up! Fashion is constantly changing, he argued, and so should women. In a speech to a group of Chicago women, he explained: “Fashion, like some astral influence, sets its impress upon you, and commands and controls your decisions, a tyrant doubly despotic since it orders women, who direct the actions of men.”²

The Merry Wives surely would agree!

1. Zeitz, p. 150.

2. Zeitz, p. 151.

Streissguth, Tom. *The Roaring Twenties*. New York: Facts on File, 2007.

Zeitz, Joshua. *Flapper*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.